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LEVINAS ON SUFFERING AND COMPASSION

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This paper provides an analysis of suffering and compassion in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas describes compassion as 'the nexus of human subjectivity' and the 'supreme ethical principle.' In his early texts, suffering discloses the burden of being, the limits of the self, and thus the approach of alterity. Levinas's later phenomenology of suffering as passive, meaningless, and evil, functions as a refutation of rational explanations of suffering. I argue that Levinasian substitution, the traumatic election to an excessive responsibility, is the compassionate suffering that Levinas terms the nexus of human subjectivity. For Levinas, ethics is the compassionate response to the vulnerable, suffering Other.

I. Introduction

Epicurus articulates a widespread analogy between philosophy and medicine when he writes, 'empty are the words of that philosopher who offers therapy for no human suffering. For just as there is no use in medical expertise if it does not give therapy for bodily diseases, so too there is no use in philosophy if it does not expel the suffering of the soul.'¹ Conceived on a medical model, philosophy provides a diagnosis, etiology, prognosis, and treatment to address human suffering. Philosophy as a practice that addresses human suffering is manifest in Plato's coupling of knowledge and virtue, and virtue with happiness, and most explicitly, perhaps, in the writings of the Stoics, Epicureans, and Skeptics. For these thinkers, philosophy constitutes a response to the vulnerability and suffering of the philosopher; the suffering of the Other, however, is generally subsumed by the concerns of the self.

The primary locus for discussions of the self and the suffering of the other in Western moral philosophy is pity. Aristotle's analysis of the structure of pity – a pain that arises when we witness serious and undeserved suffering in an other who is similar to us, or similar to someone close to us² – is not significantly challenged by much of the Western philosophical tradition. Defenders of pity and compassion, such as Rousseau and Moral Sentiment Theorists, generally agree with Aristotle's description. And

critics of the moral value of pity, such as the Stoics, Hobbes, Spinoza, Kant, and Nietzsche, do not contest the Aristotelian analysis but rather the normative claim that in some circumstances a virtuous person will feel pity, or that we *ought* to feel pity for a particular suffering other.³ Both defenders and critics of pity share the belief that attention to the concrete suffering other is or ought to be subsumed by concerns for self-perfection, moral law, utility, natural sentiment, or theodicies that provide rational explanations of suffering. Western moral traditions have generally neglected the suffering of the other *qua* other, a characteristic perhaps most apparent in Schopenhauer's ethics. For Schopenhauer, the self is concerned with the other's suffering because, ultimately, the principle of individuation is illusory; the other is the self.

Emmanuel Levinas distinguishes his philosophical project from the dominant traditions in Western moral philosophy by attending to the primacy of the suffering Other and situating the suffering of the Other at the heart of his thought.⁴ Levinas occasionally responds to the moral philosophies of Aristotle, Hobbes, Spinoza, Moral Sentiment Theorists, Kant, Mill, and Nietzsche, but he does not write systematic interpretations or critiques of their ethics. Nevertheless, the above sketch of the neglect of the suffering of the Other is implied by Levinas's texts. (Perhaps, as he recognizes exceptions to the totalizing tendency in Western philosophy, most famously in Plato's 'Good Beyond Being' and Descartes' 'Idea of Infinity,' so Levinas would acknowledge exceptions to the neglect of the Other's suffering.) Levinas's well-known critique of totalizing thought and his commitment to an asymmetrical ethics of responsibility are inspired precisely by attention to the neediness and suffering of the Other. It is the failure to attend adequately to the vulnerability and suffering of the singular Other that makes totalizing thought violent; it is the irreducible suffering of the Other that demands asymmetrical ethics.

The primacy of the suffering Other leads Levinas to argue, in the 1982 article '**Useless Suffering**,' that compassion 'can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity, to the point of being raised to the level of supreme ethical principle.'⁵ Surprisingly little has been written about suffering in relation to truth, ethics, subjectivity, and the significance of compassion in Levinas's work.⁶ In this paper I situate Levinasian ethics and subjectivity in the context of his discussions of suffering and the suffering Other. My purpose is to show that Levinas's valorization of compassion as 'the nexus of human subjectivity' and the 'supreme ethical principle' provides an important key to his philosophical project. I begin with an account of how suffering discloses the burden of being, the limits of the self, and thus the approach of alterity in Levinas's early texts. I then

move to Levinas's later phenomenology of suffering, which he describes as passive, meaningless, and evil. This phenomenology functions as a refutation of rational explanations of suffering, for, as Levinas argues, the suffering of the Other cannot be meaningfully justified. Levinas's critique of justifications of suffering leads him to search for a new ground of meaning for ethics, which he finds in the unmediated, painful exposure and responsibility to the vulnerable, suffering Other. The suffering of the Other, for Levinas, marks the world of ontology, experience, and history with the ethical command to respond with compassionate care. Ethics, then, is the response to the Other who is vulnerable, who is hungry for the very bread the subject requires to nourish herself; ethics, according to Levinas, is painful. Finally, I argue, Levinasian substitution, the traumatic election to an excessive responsibility, is the very compassionate suffering for the suffering Other that Levinas terms 'the nexus of subjectivity.'

II. Suffering, Being, and Alterity

In Levinas's early writings, suffering introduces the problematic of ontology – being and identity – and the structure of suffering indicates a beyond – alterity – and thus the beginnings of Levinas's thinking of the otherwise than being as a response to Heideggerian ontology. In suffering, the overwhelming weight of existence entangles and suffocates the existent; the self is burdened and attempts an impossible escape: 'the ground of suffering consists of the impossibility of interrupting it, and of an acute feeling of being held fast.'⁷ Pleasure and nourishment indicate that beneath anxiety before death or social practice, subjectivity is already at work at the most fundamental levels of sensibility. In enjoyment there is a temporary self-forgetting, a forgetting of the solitude that is the indissoluble relationship between the one who exists and its manner of existing. But projects or ecstasies of pleasure that seek to escape the burden of being cannot lead to the limits of the self. It is only in suffering, Levinas insists in *Time and the Other*, that I have access to the Other: 'Only a being whose solitude has reached a crispation through suffering, and in relation with death, takes its place on a ground where the relationship with the other becomes possible.'⁸ Prior to the 'crispation through suffering' I am content, nourished in my egoism, satisfied by the assimilation of goods. It is for this reason that Levinas describes suffering, the 'crispation and isolation of subjectivity,' as 'the ineluctable moment of my dialectic' (TO92).

Levinas is not particularly interested in a conceptual analysis that determines the relationship between pain and suffering, or whether distress

is a form of suffering, or other questions often addressed in a philosophy of suffering. His phenomenological approach does not lead him to raise epistemological questions of how we know the other's pain. Levinas is primarily oriented towards suffering that leaves the subject incapacitated, without the possibility of heroism and virility. He describes this suffering in his phenomenologies of the 'limit states of consciousness' and physical suffering.

The limit states of consciousness Levinas describes in his early writings include the sufferings of nausea, restlessness, indolence, ennui, despair, shame, insomnia, fatigue, and effort. These states indicate the burden of being, leaving the subject unable to master sensation, revealing the limits of the self and thereby the approach of alterity. Levinas employs the phenomenology of these states to distinguish between existence and existents, which opens a path beyond being.

Levinas also emphasizes 'the pain lightly called physical, for in it engagement in existence is without any equivocation' (TO69). Thus, images of the hungry, the cold, the homeless, and the destitute appear prominently in his writings, together with the pain and vulnerability of illness and ageing, sufferings that leave the subject without resources, mastered by what is exterior. In contrast, Levinas argues, it is possible to maintain dignity, preserving a sense of aristocratic freedom, with the Romantic or Existential sufferings of 'solitude and its anxieties.' Levinas characterizes these 'moral sufferings,' Nietzschean solitude and Heideggerian anxiety, as 'epiphenomena – phenomena of luxury or waste . . . the senseless dream of an eccentric individual, a luxation in the collective body' (TO61). Nietzsche's defense of suffering, and with it his critique of *Mitleid*, may be more suited to loneliness and bad reputation than the sufferings which concern Levinas, which cannot be mastered in a refined aloofness.

III. The Passivity, Meaninglessness, and Evil of Suffering

In Levinas's early writings, suffering arises from the burden of being, and points to alterity, a way beyond being. In his later writings, when alterity is understood as the source of ethics, Levinas's phenomenology of suffering as passive and meaningless is explicitly concerned with the ethical.

According to Levinas's phenomenology, mild discomfort can be mastered by consciousness. But, as suffering increases and overwhelms the subject, it becomes a pure passivity, meaningless and evil. Suffering that leaves the subject without resources, Levinas consistently emphasizes, is characterized by an excessive passivity. It is a submission without a

synthesizing act of consciousness. Our senses in their receptivity to the world, phenomenologists insist, are still acting, constituting meaning, forming the material content of sensation. As a content of consciousness, suffering lends itself to phenomenological description, not unlike other sensations of vision, hearing, or touch. And yet, according to Levinas's phenomenology, suffering cannot be grasped, it is 'unassumable,' and this elusiveness is its 'content' (US91). Suffering is outside the intending capacity of consciousness or the apperceptive synthesizing activity of the Kantian 'I think.' Levinas thus speaks of the ambiguity of suffering as a consciousness of the refusal of order and this refusal itself. In suffering, Levinas argues, the refusal of meaning is itself a sensible quality: 'In the guise of "experienced" content, the way in which, with a consciousness, the unbearable is precisely not borne, the manner of this not-being-borne; which, paradoxically, is itself a sensation or a datum' (US92). Beyond the ambiguity of patience – the hope and activity of passivity that masters itself – Levinas insists, there is suffering in which even the exertion of the will as hope is no longer possible. Such suffering is an undergoing without initiative, a bearing of the world, a pure passivity not associated with an activity that senses pain as an object. Thus, the very content of suffering is passivity: '*passivity* – that is, a modality – signifies as a *quiddity*' (US92). The passivity of suffering does not derive simply from a great intensity; the essence of suffering is disproportionate to our senses, an excess beyond the measure of our faculties.

Because suffering is a pure passivity, lived as the breach of the totality we constitute through intending acts, Levinas argues, even suffering that is chosen cannot be meaningfully systematized within a coherent whole. Suffering is a rupture and disturbance of meaning because it suffocates the subject and destroys the capacity for systematically assimilating the world.⁹ Pain isolates itself in consciousness, overwhelming consciousness with its insistence. Suffering, then, is an absurdity, 'an absurdity breaking out on the ground of signification.'¹⁰ This absurdity is the eidetic character of suffering Levinas seeks to draw out in his phenomenology.

Suffering often appears justified, from the biological need for sensibility to pain, to the various ways in which suffering is employed in character formation, the concerns of practical life, a community's desire for justice, and the needs of the state. Implicit in Levinas's texts is the insistence that the analysis of these sufferings calls for a distinction between the use of pain as a tool, a practice performed on the Other's body for a particular end, and the acknowledgement of the Other's lived pain. A consequence of Levinas's phenomenology is the idea that instrumental justifications of extreme suffering necessarily are insensible to the unbearable pain they

seek to legitimize. Strictly speaking, then, suffering is meaningless and cannot be comprehended or justified by rational argument.

Meaningless, and therefore unjustifiable, Levinas insists, suffering is evil. Suffering, according to Levinas's phenomenology, is an exception to the subject's mastery of being; in suffering the subject endures the overwhelming of freedom by alterity. The will that revels in the autonomous grasping of the world, in suffering finds itself grasped *by* the world. The in-itself of the will loses its capacity to exert itself and submits to the will of what is beyond its grasp. Contrary to Heidegger, it is not the anxiety before my own death which threatens the will and the self. For, Levinas argues, death, announced in suffering, is in a future always beyond the present. Instead of death, it is the pure passivity of suffering that menaces the freedom of the will. The will endures pain 'as a tyranny,' the work of a 'You,' a malicious other who perpetrates violence (TI239). This tyranny, Levinas argues, 'is more radical than sin, for it threatens the will in its very structure as a will, in its dignity as *origin* and identity' (TI237). Because suffering is unjustifiable, it is a tyranny breaking open my world of totality and meaning 'for nothing.'

The gratuitous and extreme suffering that destroys the capacity for flourishing human activity is generally addressed by thinkers in European traditions in the context of metaphysical questions of evil (is evil a positive substance or deviation from the Good?), or problems of philosophical anthropology (is evil chosen or is it a result of ignorance?). For these traditions it is evil, not suffering, that is the great scandal, for they consider suffering to be evil only when it is both severe *and* unjustified.¹¹ But for Levinas suffering is essentially without meaning and thus cannot be legitimized; all suffering is evil. As he subsumes the question of death into the problem of pain,¹² so also Levinas understands evil in the context of the unassumability and meaninglessness of suffering.¹³ The suffering of singular beings is not incidental to an evil characterized primarily by the subordination of the categorical imperative to self-interest, or by neglect of the commands of a Divine Being. Indeed, for Levinas, evil is understood through suffering: 'All evil relates back to suffering' (US92). No explanation can redeem the suffering of the other and thereby remove its evil while leaving the tyranny of a pain that overwhelms subjectivity.

IV. Against Theodicy

Levinas's phenomenology of suffering as meaningless, evil, and intrinsically useless, functions as a refutation of theodicy. Following Leibniz, the term

theodicy signifies an apologetic response to the problem of how an omnipotent and good God permits evil. God understands the evil, possesses the capacity to avert it, and in His goodness, it is reasonable to think, He would prevent suffering. Theodicies are grounded in the conviction that if God is good and omnipotent, from a Divine or philosophical perspective, evil and suffering must exist with good reason. Leibniz, for example, insists that a good God would create the best of all possible worlds; evil and suffering exist in this best of all possible worlds because a minimum of evil is necessary as a contrast to serve and illumine the Good.¹⁴ Thus, even the most extreme forms of suffering and destruction can be redeemed, harmoniously synthesized into a coherent whole.

Beyond the apologetics of monotheistic theology, Levinas regards any account that justifies suffering through situating it in the context of a coherent system as the ‘temptation of theodicy’ (US96). Levinas’s broad understanding of the term echoes Max Weber’s use of ‘theodicy’ to refer to any rational explanation for evil and suffering. Thus, for Levinas, theodicy includes justifications of suffering based on social utility, political teleology, and accounts of progress, in which present suffering is regarded as one step on a path toward a triumphant Good for the Nation or humanity which redeems past evil.

Levinas rejects theodicy because suffering is outside any possible coherent system. Kant’s critique of theodicy is based on the asymmetry between moral evil and physical evil, that is, between an evil will and suffering. For Levinas, however, the literal absurdity of suffering, its incommensurability with coherent experience of the world, undermines any attempt to understand suffering in the context of a totality of meaning. Moreover, Levinas insists, explanations of suffering justify the pain of others, authorizing actions that cause suffering, and legitimizing the negligence of unresponsive bystanders. Justifying the Other’s suffering, Levinas argues, ‘is certainly the source of all immorality’ (US99). Suffering is an evil, and to legitimize suffering is to justify evil.

Levinas’s association of violence and theodicy is a corollary of his anarchical and asymmetrical ethics. In ‘Transcendence and Evil,’ Levinas argues that the mistake Job and his friends make is to believe that the world is one’s autonomous project, a rational world in which all suffering can be explained. In a world that makes sense as a totality, in a world totalized and meaningful for a subject, there would be no suffering of innocents. In a world where suffering is explained, there could be no responsibility for the Other prior to autonomous choice, the anarchical responsibility at the heart of Levinas’s philosophy. Theodicy, the attempt to make the world and suffering coherent for the subject, is antithetical to Levinas’s asymmetrical

ethics.

Following Voltaire, who found the devastation of the Lisbon earthquake incontrovertible evidence against the Leibnizian theodicy of the best of all possible worlds, in 'Useless Suffering' Levinas finds historical proof against theodicy in the traumas that mark the twentieth century: 'Hitlerism,' 'Stalinism,' 'the Gulag,' 'Auschwitz,' and 'Cambodia.' These traumas are beyond all measure, in excess of any possible reason, and thus disclose suffering in its unjustifiability. According to Levinas, Auschwitz marks the conclusion to the age of theodicy, and this conclusion is 'perhaps the most revolutionary fact of our twentieth century' (US97), for it requires a radical new approach to suffering and therefore also to morality.

V. 'The Supreme Ethical Principle'

With the end of theodicy, the end of theories that subsume the singular suffering of the Other into systems of knowledge, Levinas finds a grounding for ethics in the compassionate exposure to the suffering Other. The end of theodicy poses the question of the value and truth of morality, the question which inspires much of Levinas's philosophy, if not his project as a whole. Echoing the well-known sentence that begins *Totality and Infinity*, in 'Useless Suffering' Levinas writes, 'The philosophical problem, then, that is posed by the useless pain that appears in its fundamental malignancy through the events of the twentieth century, concerns the meaning that religiosity, but also the human morality of goodness, can continue to have after the end of theodicy' (US99). With the end of theodicy, Levinas hears a commandment 'that now demands even more from the resources of the *I* in each one of us, and from its suffering inspired by the suffering of the other, from its compassion which is a non-useless suffering (or love), which is no longer suffering 'for nothing,' and immediately has meaning' (US100). In the 'ethical perspective of the interhuman' suffering can be meaningful when it is the compassionate suffering for the Other: 'In this perspective,' Levinas writes, 'there is a radical difference between *the suffering in the other*, where it is unforgivable to *me*, solicits *me* and calls *me*, and suffering *in me*, my own experience of suffering, whose constitutional or congenital uselessness can take on a meaning, the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may be) of someone else' (US94).¹⁵

The descriptions of suffering in Levinas's early texts are generally presented from the perspective of the suffering self. Alterity provides the escape from the overwhelming burden of suffering; the compassionate

gesture arrives from the other.¹⁶ This analysis of the suffering self is continued in *Totality and Infinity* (TI237–39). But the analyses of *Totality and Infinity* and later texts also address the suffering of the Other. Levinas's phenomenological descriptions emphasize the passivity and therefore the meaninglessness, and thus the evil of suffering. However, suffering is the disclosure not just of evil, but also of the ethical beyond ontology, of evil and good. When the sufferer is overwhelmed a possibility arises for an opening, 'a half opening, and, more precisely, the half opening that a moan, a cry, a groan or a sigh slips through – the original call for aid, for curative help' (US93). It is the call the Talmudic sages indicate in a story Levinas cites elsewhere, of prayers unable to enter the gates of heaven that are only accessible to the tears of sufferers.¹⁷ The sufferer's cry opens the world of being to the ethical, for it calls me to respond, it commands me. The tears and cries of the sufferer are more compelling than any argument could be. As Y.A. Kang observes of Levinas's texts, the cry of suffering discloses 'not one of several themes which could be approached from an ethical perspective. Suffering is precisely the opening of the ethical perspective.'¹⁸ Indeed, the very epiphany of the Other is vulnerability and suffering. This epiphany is not the communication of information in a system of meanings, but marks the world of being, history, and experience with the command and the call of ethics: the appeal of the Other solicits me through destitution, nudity, and hunger (TI200). In compassion, in the evil of suffering that is a wounding, the good manifests. There is, Levinas argues, a 'Good behind evil.'¹⁹ In the trauma of compassionate suffering for the Other, Levinas insists, 'the Good reabsorbs, or redeems, the violence of non freedom' (OB123). Ethics is the wounding of exposure to the suffering Other; compassion, for Levinas, is 'the supreme ethical principle.'

Levinas's claim in 'Useless Suffering,' that compassion is the 'nexus of human subjectivity' and the 'supreme ethical principle,' seems to contradict his insistence on the primacy of responsibility. In a 1982 interview, for example, when Levinas is asked about his views on Schopenhauer's account of love and compassion he responds that compassion is only one aspect of responsibility for the Other. But one must be careful about interpreting this statement. In *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas occasionally characterizes pity (*pitié*) and compassion (*compassion*) as events of a psychological order (OB125, 128, 146). In these instances, 'compassion' is employed as a synonym for 'sympathy,' as a moral sentiment and therefore incapable of addressing the ethical beyond being. (It is in this context that Levinas refers to the 'banal term "compassion."'²⁰) In the same text, however, Levinas employs 'pity' and 'compassion' to characterize the weight of responsibility that precedes autonomy, a being-for-the-other constituted by a suffering for

the Other (OB 166, 195n.12, 196n.21). This ambiguity reflects Levinas's concern to distinguish the ethical subjectivity of responsibility from the moral sentiments of sympathy and compassion, while simultaneously characterizing responsibility and substitution as a suffering for the Other.²¹ Thus, one can characterize Levinasian responsibility as the suffering of a burden, a compassionate suffering for the suffering Other outside the psychological.

Levinas's analysis of compassion is not inspired by the optimism that characterizes the work of Rousseau, Hume, and Smith. The traumas of his century deny him the unwarranted confidence in sympathy and natural benevolence. Unlike the theories of moral sentiment, Levinas is not interested in a compassionate suffering that is the result of resemblance with the other explicable by 'human nature': an emotion, a motivation, an illness, or any other psychophysiological causal mechanism such as a 'guilt complex' or 'some tendency to sacrifice' (OB124, 197n27). Levinasian compassion is a wounding, a sensibility that is not the affectivity of sympathetic feelings but the affectivity to the moral command of the Other.

According to Levinas, the response to the burden of the Other's needs ruptures my own contentment. Ethics, for Levinas, is the sacrifice of my own nourishment *for* the other. 'It is,' he writes, 'not a gift of the heart, but of the bread from one's mouth, of one's own mouthful of bread, it is the openness, not only of one's pocketbook, but of the doors of one's home, a "sharing of your bread with the famished," a "welcoming of the wretched into your house" (Isaiah 58)' (OB74). Only a corporeal subject who hungers, or could hunger, can give bread, for to give is to give the object of one's own need. 'Incarnation is an extreme passivity; to be exposed to sickness, suffering, death, is to be exposed to compassion, and, as a self, to the gift that costs' (OB195n.12). Levinasian ethics is the tearing of oneself from oneself, the 'tearing of the mouthful of bread from the mouth that tastes in full enjoyment' (OB74). Ethics, for Levinas, is not simply the gift of bread to the hungry, not only the nourishment of the other, but the painful loss of my own satisfaction: it is 'an offering oneself that is a suffering' (OB54).

Levinas finds an image for the ethics of generosity and suffering for the Other in maternity. In his texts, the terms 'pity,' 'mercy,' and 'compassion,' are inspired by the Hebrew *ra amim*, which he understands as 'justice . . . already . . . mixed with goodness.'²² As Herman Cohen emphasizes, in his discussion of the centrality of compassion in the prophetic tradition, *ra amim* is derived from *re em*, the uterus.²³ Thus, Levinas compares ethical subjectivity for the Other to 'an emotion of maternal entrails'²⁴: 'To suffer from another is to have charge of him, to support him, to be in his place, to be consumed by him. Every love or

every hatred of a neighbor as a reflected attitude presupposes this prior vulnerability, this mercy, this ‘groaning of the entrails.’ Already on the level of sensibility the subject is *for the other*: there is substitution, responsibility, expiation.²⁵

VI. ‘The Nexus of Subjectivity’

Levinas is known for the primacy of alterity and for his contributions to a language of otherness. Yet these contributions are accompanied, necessarily, by the development and refinement of a new language of subjectivity, identity, and the self. For, Levinas argues in *Totality and Infinity*, ‘the alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the other, is possible only if the other is other with respect to a term whose essence is to remain at the point of departure, to serve as *entry* into the relation, to be the same not relatively but absolutely’ (TI36). Thus, Levinas writes in his ‘Preface,’ *Totality and Infinity* presents ‘itself as a defense of subjectivity’ (TI26). The analysis of the subject in *Totality and Infinity*, whose contentment is ruptured by the approach of alterity, is extended and radicalized in Levinas’s later writings. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas emphasizes the discomfort of subjectivity as a wounding; the subject is burdened by an undecidable, unchosen, insistent demand beyond its capacity to fulfill. Subjectivity understood as substitution is at the heart of *Otherwise Than Being*.

In contrast to Levinas’s earlier texts, according to *Otherwise Than Being*, in addition to the weight of being the subject bears, it suffers the weight of the Other as responsibility. In Levinas’s later writings the ‘for the other’ of the self is more than the metaphysical desire for the Other of *Totality and Infinity*: the Other is characterized as ‘the undesirable *par excellence*.’²⁶ ‘In a sense,’ Levinas writes in *Otherwise Than Being*, ‘nothing is more burdensome than a neighbor?’ (OB88). The approach of alterity is no longer described as an escape from the suffocation of suffering; the approach of alterity is characterized as the augmentation of suffering, an amplification of the weight of being. In proximity, in contact, we bear the Other as a painful burden who affects us.

Levinas’s insistence that the work of compassion is ‘to do something for the other,’²⁷ can be misleading. For, it is not the gift of food or clothing that actually constitutes the ethical relation; the opening and exposure to the Other is the generosity of ethics. Compassion, though it is often unable to provide medication or consolation, bears witness. This witnessing requires no unique experience or special capacity. The compassionate witness does not seek to recuperate the witnessed Other into a representation or a

concept; it breaks forth as testimony, as pure ‘saying,’ as ‘*hineni*,’ ‘*me voici*,’ ‘here I am.’²⁸

The English ‘here I am,’ with its nominative declaration fails to capture the responsiveness, the obedience to command expressed in *me voici*. As Levinas interprets the saying of ‘here I am,’ it is not the Kantian ‘I think,’ but rather an ‘I give myself,’ ‘I expose myself,’ or even more precisely, reflecting the accusative grammar of the ‘*me voici*,’ in my passivity ‘I am given,’ ‘I am exposed.’ The accusative grammar signifies the subject as the one who undergoes, who is acted upon. The ‘here I am’ is an election that tears away my clothing in categories, identities, and concepts, rupturing my refuge from the persecuting demand of the Other who suffers, from my obligation to suffer for her suffering.²⁹

The compassionate exposure to the Other of ‘here I am’ is not the expression or transmission of information: it is the saying (*le Dire*) Levinas distinguishes from the said (*le Dit*). It is the sincerity of a painful exposure to the Other without reserve, an openness to responsibility: ‘in saying suffering signifies in the form of *giving*’ (OB50).³⁰ And this is ethics: ‘ethics is the breakup of the originary unity of transcendental apperception . . . Witnessed, and not thematized, in the sign given to the other, the infinite signifies out of responsibility for the other, out of the one-for-the-other, a subject supporting everything, subject to everything, that is, *suffering for everyone*’ (OB148).³¹

With the saying of ‘here I am,’ the exposure and generosity to the Other, we see the trace of Levinasian subjectivity. It is in susceptibility and proximity that Levinas locates subjectivity; my own *here* is made possible by exposure to suffering. This subject is not ethical accidentally, as if ethical were one of a number of characteristics. Rather, the subject is essentially and primarily ethical, a singular *someone* elected to moral responsibility.

Subjectivity, according to Levinas, is a trauma, the passion of the self, a suffering for the Other; it is a ‘passivity of wounds’ and a ‘hemorrhage’ that bleeds my own comfort for the sake of the Other (OB74). Thus, to describe subjectivity, Levinas employs the violent terminology of ‘persecution,’ ‘hostage,’ ‘obsession,’ ‘restlessness,’ ‘recurrence,’ and ‘diachrony.’ Subjectivity, according to Levinas, is an assignation. It is as a moral subject that I am elected, unique and responsible: ‘I exist through the other and for the other’ (OB114). Without recourse to help, unable to slip away, irreplaceable, the singular self is persecuted, ‘the non-interchangeable par excellence’ (OB117). The proximity of the Other is a persistent disturbance of the ego. Elected in the time of the Other, an immemorial past it cannot recuperate, the self is out of phase with itself. The trauma of proximity is the moment Levinas describes in his phenomenology of suffering when the

subject is without the capacity to apprehend and synthesize. Substitution for the Other is ‘the suffering and vulnerability of the sensible as the other in me’ (OB124–25). Indeed, Levinas consistently employs the same language he uses to describe the overwhelming of suffering to describe substitution. Subjectivity is the incessant wounding of compassion, substituting myself for the suffering Other; compassion is ‘the nexus of subjectivity.’

VII. Conclusion

Contemporary moral theorists maintain the traditional Western philosophical wariness of unlimited demands to respond to the singular, suffering other. Kantians fear that a duty to respond to the suffering other may contradict universal moral principles. Consequentialists are afraid that without limiting the duty to alleviate the suffering of a singular other, the cumulative suffering in the world may be increased. And some moral theorists, especially virtue ethicists, argue that an unconditional demand to respond to the suffering other may require an excessive and unwarranted sacrifice. Many moral philosophers insist we have special responsibilities to care for family, friends, and fellow citizens, obligations we do not owe to strangers and foreign others. Moreover, there is a fear that attending primarily to the question of suffering leads to hedonist utilitarianism and away from loftier principles and ends. All of these concerns are reasonable. Indeed, Levinas seems to share them. As he notes in *Otherwise than Being*, with the necessary move from ethics to justice, ‘My responsibility for all can and has to manifest itself also in limiting itself. The ego can, in the name of this unlimited responsibility, be called upon to concern itself also with itself’ (OB128). And yet, the face of the suffering Other, with its irreducible ethical demand, ruptures these eminently reasonable arguments. The eyes of the vulnerable and suffering Other speak to us, they command us, even when we turn away from their often unbearable weight. For Levinas, this suffering of the Other is the primary ethical and epistemological fact.

As the ‘Good Beyond Being’ illuminates all other ideas for Plato, so the ethical and epistemological priority of the suffering Other orients Levinas’s philosophy. It is by grounding ethics and subjectivity in the compassionate suffering for the Other that Levinas is able to realize his project of identifying ‘the I and morality.’³² In contrast to the Western tradition of philosophy as autonomy, grounded in the totalizing vision of the self, Levinas’s thought finds its source in the pre-originary meaning that arrives from the Other; it is philosophy as heteronomy. When Levinas speaks of heteronomy he is not referring to Kantian heteronomy, the

various motivations of nature and custom that generally inspire egoism. Rather, Levinas argues, before the very choice of freedom and unfreedom, prior to judgment, reflection, determination of the moral law, or any moral reasoning, we are always already responsible for the suffering and vulnerable Other. The heteronomous truth of the suffering Other leads to a reorientation of subjectivity: the self is remade by the suffering of the Other. The self becomes the self-emptying that is an opening, a welcoming of the Other. My position as I, Levinas argues, ‘consists in being able to respond to the essential destitution of the Other’ (TI215). Levinas conceives of the self not as a fortress, but as the compassionate exposure of substitution.

Levinas’s heteronomous truth is not cognitive. It is not a vision of some transcendent realm or hidden spiritual world. To attend to the Other, the truth of heteronomy, is to be a welcoming subjectivity. This is the ethical moment: ‘To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give’ (TI75). This is the wisdom that Levinas addresses in the 1987 preface to the German edition of *Totality and Infinity*, where he indicates the thematization of a truth beyond the truth of knowledge of various objects, or reflections upon this knowledge. Levinas wonders, ‘whether knowledge beloved of and expected from philosophers was not, beyond the wisdom of such knowledge, the wisdom of love, or wisdom in the guise of love . . . A wisdom taught by the face of the other man.’³³ For Levinas, the wisdom taught by the face of the Other, by the suffering and vulnerability that is the epiphany of the Other in the face, is the wisdom of compassion.

Endnotes

1. Long, A.A. and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume I: Translations of the Principal Sources, with Philosophical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 155. For the most thorough exploration of the medical analogy in Greek philosophy, see M. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
2. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1385b12–15.
3. See Nussbaum, ‘Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion.’ *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13 (1996): pp. 27–58.
4. Levinas was unsure whether an animal other could be the singular Other, whether the animal face is a source of the ethical command. Nevertheless, the primacy of suffering in Levinas’s thought is fertile ground for exploring moral responsibility for non-human others.
5. Levinas, ‘Useless Suffering,’ in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. M. Smith and B. Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 94. Hereafter cited in the text as US, followed by the page number.

6. For scholarship that addresses one or more aspects of Levinas's approach to suffering, see R. Gibbs, 'Unjustifiable Suffering,' in *Suffering Religion*, eds. R. Gibbs and E. Wolfson (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 13–35; R. Bernstein, 'Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. S. Critchley and R. Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 252–67; A. Pitkin, 'Scandalous Ethics: Infinite Presence with Suffering,' *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8 (2001): pp. 231–46; R. Cohen, 'What Good is the Holocaust? On Suffering and Evil,' *Philosophy Today* 43 (1999): pp. 176–83; W. Hamblet, 'Suffering in the Cosmos: The Redemption of Evil in Levinas and Weil,' *Philosophical Writings* 10 (1999): pp. 69–79; M. Baird, 'Emmanuel Levinas and the Problem of Meaningless Suffering: The Holocaust as a Test Case,' *Horizons* 26 (1999): pp. 73–84; D. Keenan, *Death and Responsibility: The 'Work' of Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), especially pp. 82–88; and Y.A. Kang, 'Levinas on Suffering and Solidarity,' *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 59 (1997): pp. 482–504.
7. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 52. Hereafter cited in the text as OB, followed by the page number.
8. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 76. Hereafter cited in the text as TO, followed by the page number.
9. Levinas's discussion of the ways in which suffering overwhelms the synthesizing activity of consciousness bears some resemblance to Elaine Scarry's account in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). Scarry contrasts the experience of physical pain with the typical phenomenological structure of consciousness as consciousness of... That is, feelings, thoughts, sensations, or other meaningful forms of consciousness are feelings, thoughts, or sensations of particular objects. But all this changes with physical pain, which, Scarry argues, 'has no referential content. It is not of or for anything' (*Body in Pain*, 5).
10. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 239. Hereafter cited in the text as TI, followed by the page number.
11. Norman Fiering claims that 'the belief that God or even a pious man would feel the least bit of pity for the suffering of sinners in hell had to overcome a tremendous weight of tradition. The predominant view, which goes back to Tertullian at least, was that God and the angels together would derive not uneasiness but an augmentation of bliss from the contemplation of the punishment of the damned' (N. Fiering, 'Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37 [1976]: p. 216).
12. For Levinas, death appears in the problematic of suffering; the immediacy and intensity of pain holds within itself, beyond its own sense of there being no beyond, a mystery that is the unknown of death.
13. Richard Bernstein is right to point out that Levinas's project can be interpreted as a response to the radical evil that marks the twentieth century. Yet, we must remember that for Levinas, evil can only be understood through suffering. See R. Bernstein, *op. cit.*
14. See G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* (London: Longman, 1960).

of Man, and the Origin of Evil, trans. E.M. Huggard (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952).

15. Steven Tudor provides a systematic defense of this position that is in part inspired by Levinas's writings. Tudor argues that what distinguishes compassionate sorrow from emotional infection, condescending pity, fear of one's own suffering, or imaginative projection of the self – the various passions and emotions with which compassion is confused – is that compassionate sorrow is the only meaningful account of suffering. See Tudor, *Compassion and Remorse: Acknowledging the Suffering Other* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001).
16. In *Existence and Existents*, the structure of alterity as an escape from suffering provides the context of Levinas's first discussion of compassion. Levinas describes compassionate attention as lifting the sufferer out of her solitude through the rupture of the tightening skin that smothers the self. The fissure in the suffocation of suffering, Levinas argues, is found in the consoling caress. The consoling caress is not the reward of pain or the erasure of suffering; with compassion there is not even the promise of an end to suffering. Instead, the 'effect of compassion . . . concerns the very instant of physical pain, which is then no longer condemned to itself, is transported "elsewhere," finds "fresh air," a dimension and a future' (EE93). Alterity brings a future that resurrects the present, rupturing the suffocation of being, the enchainment to the self that is suffering. This appears in what Levinas terms the 'infinitely mysterious' event of compassion (EE93).
17. Levinas, 'Ideology and Idealism,' trans. S. Ames and A. Lesley, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. S. Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 246.
18. Kang, Y.A., 'Levinas on Suffering and Solidarity,' *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 59 (1997): p. 498.
19. Levinas, 'Transcendence and Evil,' in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 181.
20. E. Levinas, 'Secularization and Hunger,' trans. B. Bergo, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal: Levinas's Contribution to Contemporary Philosophy* 20/2 – 21/1 (1998): p. 11.
21. Levinas also employs the terms sympathy (*sympathie*) (OB128) and *Einfühlung* (OB125) to refer to the sufferings of psychological fellow-feeling. However, there is no ambiguity concerning these two terms, as they are never employed by Levinas to refer to the ethical being-for-the-other.
22. Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. A. Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 28.
23. See H. Cohen, *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Herman Cohen*, trans. and ed. E. Jospe (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971), p. 71.
24. Levinas, 'No Identity,' in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 47n.6. For an account of Levinas, maternity, and ethics, see C. Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), especially chapter nine; and L. Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).
25. Ibid. pp. 146–47.
26. Levinas, 'God and Philosophy,' in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 164.
27. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. R.

Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 97.

- 28. The phrase 'here I am' is a translation of the French '*me voici*,' which Levinas draws from the Hebrew expression '*hineni*.' Levinas's usage of *hineni* is inspired by sacred texts, where it expresses the attentiveness, service, and obedience of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah.
- 29. To the extent that it has any identity before autonomy and consciousness, the I is defined by the Other, a reversal of the totalizing definition of alterity through the Same that so concerned Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*.
- 30. Emphasizing the suffering of saying, Levinas writes, 'Saying, the most passive passivity, is inseparable from patience and pain, even if it can take refuge in the said, finding again in a wound the caress in which pain arises, and then the contact' (OB50).
- 31. My emphasis.
- 32. Levinas, 'The Trace of the Other,' trans. A. Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. M. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 353.
- 33. Levinas, '*Totality and Infinity*: Preface to the German Edition,' in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 200.

